

Resurrecting the Dead in Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces*

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War is exile by other means.¹ That is to say, the violent uprooting and dispersion of a people is attendant on the circumstances of warfare. This was as much the case in medieval Europe as it was in Rwanda and Bosnia in the twentieth-century. Many and hellish as they are, one would be loath to compare or single out any specific instance of war and its ensuing mass human migration. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, it may be ventured that the exilic event which has become *the* historical and cultural fixation in society today, and which certainly stands for one of mankind's darkest hours, is the diaspora which took place during and after World War II.² In addition to the six million European Jews who lost their lives between 1939 and 1945, another estimated two hundred and fifty thousand were left displaced by the war and forced to leave their native lands. It was in their new homes (mainly North America and Israel) that these escapees would struggle to make sense of a past that threatened their livelihood as well as their humanity. Here they would execute a balancing act between trying to forge a new life in the present while never forgetting the wrongs they suffered during the war. Here they would eventually pass on the trauma of persecution and degradation to their children. And here second and third generation Jewish sons and daughters would suffer the consequences of their heritage, caught in the double bind of trying to break free from the ghosts of the past while at the same time being keenly aware of their role as guardians of that legacy.

It is these and other critical issues that *Fugitive Pieces* addresses. In Anne Michaels's fictional memoir war is shown to lead to exile in its various manifestations including, among others, the dispossession of familiar and familial surroundings as well as the loss of national identity and sense of self. Above all, exile is exposed as depriving subjects of their voice. In an attempt to eradicate the subsequent and debilitating silence, power is vested in language. Writing, so the contention here, is championed as having the power to help restore the lives of *all* those affected by war. In short, putting past experiences into a coherent narrative is not only claimed to be a way of helping the individual come to terms with the past or deal with the burden of exile's legacy but also as a very effective means of making silenced voices heard, and especially of ensuring that memories—however painful they be—are not committed to oblivion but brought into the open.

Looking ahead it will be maintained that Anne Michaels thematises the importance of preserving the life narratives of those who survived as well as those who perished in the war. Indeed, the text is argued to perform the very thing it proclaims—by taking the form of memoir, *Fugitive Pieces* is said to literally enact the sustaining of discarded life-stories and silenced voices. Concomitantly it is claimed that, through her appropriation of the memoir genre, the author manages to vividly convey feelings of angst and uneasiness associated with war and dislocation. To this end she is said to make the narrative vacillate between the actual

¹ This is, of course, an adaptation of the well-known saying by Carl von Clausewitz that "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means" (1997: 24), later famously inverted by Michel Foucault to "politics is war pursued by other means" (*The History of Sexuality*, 1990: 93).

² Dan Diner notes that the Holocaust became conspicuously present in public discourse in the seventies and eighties, but that "its significance for universal historical consciousness and moral standards [became] irrevocable only after 1989" (2003: 67).

and the fictional world. As will become clear, this conflation of the imaginary and the real unsettles and affects readers to such a degree that they are made to share in the protagonists' sense of displacement and unease.

This paper starts off by analysing the relation between war and exile. It looks at the ways in which displacement manifests itself in the aftermath of war and at how it leads to dispossession and destruction. It then turns in the opposite direction and focuses on the healing powers of writing as conveyed in and through the text, and finally ends with a special focus on the experimental use of memoir and on how it has been appropriated to relay experiences of exclusion, trauma and malaise. In a word, it suggests that the text performs a rescue action as it exhumes forgotten life stories and emplaces them in the canon of Life Writing, Exile and War.

It never ends with war

The principal protagonist in *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob Beer, suffers a most aggressive form of uprooting. The narrative opens with a disturbing scene as it chronicles seven-year-old Jakob's furtive escape from the Nazis in war-torn Poland. Hiding in a cupboard while his parents are slain and his sister forcefully removed, the child manages to get away and escape his fate. After the soldiers leave, he flees his home and finds refuge in the bogs of the Iron Age settlement of Biskupin. Here, as he "[surfaces] into the miry streets of the drowned city" (5), he is rescued by Athos, a Greek archaeologist charged with excavating the site. Athos takes Jakob home with him to Greece where the boy is slowly brought back to life:

On the island of Zakynthos, Athos—scientist, scholar, middling master of languages—performed his most astounding feat. From out of his trousers he plucked the seven-year-old refugee Jakob Beer.

(14)

Abruptly and violently rent from his home, Jakob at first cannot "conceive of any feeling stronger than fear" (19) in his new surroundings. He literally clings to Athos, following him "from one room to the other" (20). Under the care of his *koumbaros*, Jakob gradually starts feeling safe and secure in his new home. Subsequently he describes Athos's house on the island as "a crow's nest, a Vinland peathouse" (29), a place, in other words, where he—analogous to his bog-like hiding place in Biskupin—feels "safely buried" (8).

Jakob's life on Zakynthos, and the fact that he feels safe there, emphasises the important role geographic space plays for the émigré. It suggests that if the refugee is to be restored to life, it is essential that the native land be substituted with a place where they feel welcome and protected. This is also the point Athos is trying to make when he says that a man who has no landscape is "Nothing but mirrors and tides" (86). Far more than merely denoting the contours of a physical terrain, land is what feeds the soul. Athos accordingly believes that there is a strong connection between the material and the abstract world, and that by giving Jakob a new home, he might be able to rekindle his spirit. For his part, Jakob realises that his godfather is trying to give him a land he can call his own; he says that even as a young child he understood that though his "blood-past was drained" (20) from him, he "was being offered a second history" (ibid.). When he is older he comes to appreciate the interaction between the physical and spiritual realm more, and begins to understand that feeling at home in a new terrain depends on how much that place resonates with one's self.

As such, he asserts that even though he will remain a stranger in Greece no matter how long he lives there, he feels “at home in [the] hills, with broken icons hovering over every abyss, every valley, *the spirit looking back upon the body*” (166, my emphasis). The synthesis of spirit and matter finds its way into several of his descriptions of the island, and might be extended to a metaphorical interpretation of the shelter and comfort Jakob finds there. He describes it as “full of light” and built on “solid rock”, a place where he learns to “tolerate images rising in [him] like bruises” (19). That Jakob closely identifies with his new home also becomes apparent when one sees the island’s typography as analogous to his own self. It is not hard to read in an island “scarred by earthquakes” and exhibiting a “barren west and fertile east” (26) the scars of Jakob’s own past, or recognise the opposing forces of Eros and Thanatos within him.³

Greece, then, might not be his country of physical birth but it is where Jakob’s spiritual rebirth is conceived. Considering his traumatic removal from Poland, the child settles in remarkably well in his adopted home. Whatever he achieves in terms of stability, however, is soon disrupted when Athos gets a position to teach in Canada after the war and Jakob once again finds himself being dislocated. On arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Toronto, Jakob experiences “a stunning despair” (91) and initially shows no interest in getting to know his new surroundings. Later he is nonetheless coaxed into exploring the city with Athos, and as they discover sites of primeval lakes and forests during these excursions, Athos tries to explain to Jakob that *all* men are strangers to this world, that “every human [is] a newcomer” (103). Though Jakob takes cognisance of such sentiments and is able to momentarily shake off the feeling of alienation in his new home, in the long run he never really manages to feel at ease on the American continent. This does not mean that he does not try to fit in. Indeed, when he meets and marries Alex after Athos passes away, Jakob initially appears to have found a new form of stability. But the cracks in their relationship can be discerned right from the start, and the *inverse* of Athos’s dictum that “Love makes you see a place differently” (82) is, unfortunately, also true for them. Jakob in fact feels like an outsider as soon as Alex moves into his flat and it is only a matter of time before the inevitable happens and their marriage falls apart.

Alone in Canada Jakob experiences for himself how “In xenetia—in exile ... in a foreign landscape, a man discovers the old songs. He calls out for water from his own well, for apples from his own orchard, for the muscat grapes from his own vine” (86). Considering that Jakob sees Greece as his spiritual abode, it is not surprising that it is Athos’s family home on the island of Idhra that he chooses to return to after the turbulent events in Toronto. Here, in the tranquility and shelter the hills offer, Jakob can process the death of Athos and the separation from Alex. To help him come to terms with what has happened, Jakob spends his time translating and writing, and only occasionally goes back to Toronto to visit his friends Maurice and Irena. On one such an occasion Jakob meets and falls in love Michaela, and marries her shortly after. While he felt like a stranger in Alex’s company, he tells us he has “a feeling of homecoming” (178) in Michaela’s presence. It is also with Michaela that he finally finds inner peace—in the end it is not “on Idhra or on

³ Freud first writes about how Thanatos opposes Eros in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out, the life instincts are instincts of self-preservation whereas the death drive is aimed at bringing the living being to the inorganic state. Further, while the death instincts are at first “directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction ... they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct” (2006: 97). These conflicting forces can also be observed in Jakob’s character. As is later discussed in more detail, Jakob’s self-destructive tendencies (evinced in his self-reproach about the past and his clinging to the dead) are in opposition to his desire to love and to live life in the present.

Zakynthos but among Michaela's birches that [he feels] for the first time safe above ground, earthed in a storm" (189). Despite Jakob's professing that his sense of belonging is tied to Michaela rather than any geographic locality, the couple decide not to remain in Toronto after they are married but to return to Idhra. But back in Greece, just as things seem to be finally working in his favour, Jakob and his young wife are subjected to a sad and ironic fate: only months after they first meet, their new-found happiness is cut short as both of them are fatally wounded in a car accident in Athens.

Though Jakob's death only takes place more than halfway through the book, its diegetic significance is foregrounded when the reader is proleptically informed on the very first page that:

Poet Jakob Beer, who was also a translator of posthumous writing from the war, was struck and killed by a car in Athens in the spring of 1993, at age sixty. His wife had been standing with him on the sidewalk; she survived her husband by two days.

Further the prologue indicates that what is about to unfold is the memoirs Jakob Beer began to write shortly before he died. Tellingly, the introduction to the memoirs ends with a quote by the poet in question that "a man's experience of war ... never ends with war" (ibid.). The allusion here, to begin with, is the chain of geographic displacements set in motion by the condition of warfare. As we have seen, these instances of dislocation Jakob is subjected to require some adjustment, not least of which to the unfamiliar terrain of his new surroundings. The exilic effects of war, however, do not end with the individual's physical uprooting, for in his new country the refugee is also confronted with the mentality of a foreign culture whose ways and traditions he does not understand and with a language he does not speak. In what follows we look at these ramifications of geographic displacement, and ask how language and society might exacerbate the subject's experience of exile and his sense of unease. As such, social exclusion and linguistic alienation are presented as further proof of the maxim that an individual's experience of war never ends when the fighting on the battlefield is over.

On the outside

Because Jakob is relocated on separate occasions, he is put through the process of learning a new language and getting to know a new culture not once but twice. In the first four years of his exile from Poland he learns to master Greek. That the child is aware of how a foreign language can make one feel ill at ease with oneself is evident when he tells us, "I longed for my mouth to feel my own when speaking [Athos's] beautiful and awkward Greek, its thick consonants, its many syllables difficult and graceful" (22). When they move to Canada the process repeats itself and Jakob finds his mouth and tongue slow and unwilling to cooperate once again. While he expresses his longing "to cleanse [his] mouth of memory" (22) when learning Greek, he says of English, "The numb tongue attaches itself, orphan, to any sound it can ... Then, finally, many years later, tears painfully free" (95). The *difference* between Zakynthos and Toronto is that while Jakob could acquire Greek within the protected environment of Athos's home, he is completely exposed to the trials and tribulations of learning a new language in Canada. Here he discovers to what extent not knowing the language can make one feel socially excluded. A case in point is when he comes home one day from doing grocery shopping, clearly upset. On being questioned Jakob tells Athos that he had stormed

out of a store because the shopkeeper had said to him, “We have suspicions” (94). And although Athos’s investigations reveal that the man had, in fact, said *chickens* and not *suspensions*, Jakob feels so shaken and humiliated by the episode that he never enters the store again.

In order to improve his English language skills, Athos encourages Jakob to come up with puns since “they [penetrate] into the heart of comprehension” (100). From wordplay Jakob moves on to writing poetry in the hope that under this type of scrutiny “the secret of English would crack open” (ibid.). When he finally turns his attention to translating, he muses about the fact that the translator, poet and immigrant face a similar plight where language is concerned—all three, he says, “try to identify the invisible, what’s between the lines, the mysterious implications” (109). The immigrant, in other words, recognises the importance of learning the nuances of the host country’s language in order to fit in and hence tries to move—just like the translator and the poet—from “language to life” (ibid.). From this we can safely infer that the main reason Jakob is so anxious to learn first Greek and then English is that he believes it will help him to feel less excluded in his new home. However, there is another, less conspicuous motive behind his desire to master these languages, namely that they can offer him protection from what happened in the past. This can be gleaned when he says, “I tried to bury images, to cover them over with Greek and English words” (93). Jakob’s desire for especially the English language to bury the past is, in fact, so sharp that he finds his spirit literally *craving* it:

The English language was food. I shoved it into my mouth, hungry for it. A gush of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced.

(92)

Jakob, it seems, wants to immerse himself in other languages because he believes they will shield him from the traumatic events of the past. At the same time he is (paradoxically perhaps) concerned that he might forget the past altogether. So, in order not to forget his childhood experiences while at the same time being sheltered from them, he starts writing about these events in a foreign language. He tells us that it is exactly because it was “an alphabet without memory” (101), a “sonar, a microscope through which [he] listened and observed” (112), that is, a language that could protect him, that he finally chose to write his memoirs in English:

And later, when I began to write down the events of my childhood in a language foreign to their happening, it was a revelation. English could protect me ...

(101)

Jakob believes that writing in foreign languages can act as a filter and help a person deal with the traumatic events of the past. The inevitable consequence of favouring a different language to one’s mother tongue is, of course, that the latter will become neglected. This is also true for Jakob whose vernacular seems to be in danger of being forgotten. When they are still on the island, Athos presciently encourages the young émigré to speak Yiddish and makes him review the Hebrew alphabet because he does not want Jakob to ever forget it. But in spite of Athos’s efforts, as Jakob is slowly drawn into other languages, Yiddish becomes just another faded memory. And whilst Jakob is, on the one hand, grieved by the fact that his native language

becomes “a melody gradually eaten away by silence” (28) as his tongue learns “its *sad* new powers” (25, my emphasis), he is simultaneously (as has been pointed out) literally *desirous* that Greek and English take over his linguistic faculties.

The unconscious, one might venture, has more similarities with language other than its structure.⁴ For although Jakob tries to protect himself from the past by covering it over with Greek and English words, and despite the lapse of years in which he neither hears nor speaks Yiddish, Jakob's mother tongue will not be repressed. Overhearing a mere word one evening while out on a stroll triggers the memory of a song his mother used to sing, and with that the image of her brushing his sister Bella's hair. Another time, in the Jewish market of Toronto, he has an even more disturbing experience—when he hears Yiddish casually flowing off the tongue of cheese-sellers and bakers he tells us that he listened, “thin and ugly with feeling” (101) and that he sensed “fear and love intertwined” (ibid.). Hearing the language of his childhood, in other words, might be gratifying but it also revives painful memories and is therefore exceedingly distressing. Thus Jakob might be said to find himself confronted with the double bind of linguistic homelessness. That is to say, while he wants to indulge in Greek and English, he is simultaneously distressed by the fact that his mother tongue is being relegated to the periphery.

We have established that Jakob loses touch with his native language and puts all his efforts into learning Greek and English. We have also ascertained that because foreign languages offer him the distance he needs to protect himself from the past he decides to write his memoirs in English. The question to be asked is why he returns to *Greece* to do so; i.e. would it not make sense to remain in an English-speaking country if that is to be the language of the text? The answer, I believe, lies in the social alienation and concomitant unease Jakob experiences in Canada. Indeed, Toronto turns out to be a place where Jakob struggles to adjust not only to the topography of the land and language of the people but also to the way things are done. When he first arrives there Jakob finds Canadian traditions exceedingly strange, from what people eat to how they go out to dine on their own. These initial feelings of being out of place and of not fitting in remain with Jakob throughout the time he stays in Canada. The extent to which he feels marginalised by society is epitomised by the lack of social contact he has with kids his own age. While he finds it hard to make friends at school, he declares that he cannot even contemplate having a girlfriend since he would not know how to explain his past and his peculiar lifestyle to her. The fact of the matter is that he and Athos would be living in virtual (self-imposed) social exile were it not for the other ‘strays’ such as Constantine, Joseph and Gregor who have gathered around them. And while he feels fairly at ease around these grown-up friends, Jakob is very awkward among his peers. In the company of Alex's friends he especially feels “maggoty with insecurities; [for he] had European circuitry, [his] voltage wrong for the socket” (132). Added to these insecurities is the concern that living in this country, “Speaking this language, eating strange food, wearing these clothes” (126) will gradually make him forget his family and his past. Finally it is these worries together with feelings of alienation and insecurity which induce him to go to Idhra and compile his memoirs there.

⁴ The allusion here is to Lacanian theory which compares the structure of the unconscious to that of language. Terry Eagleton notes that this “is not only because it works by metaphor and metonymy: it is also because, like language for the poststructuralists, it is composed less of *signs*—stable meanings—than of *signifiers*” (2008: 146).

The findings above allow us to postulate that feeling out of place does not only have to do with the language one does or does not speak but also with the traditions and conventions of a place and its people, with how they function and how they think. This is Jakob's experience of things *as much as it is* that of the narrative's other protagonist, Ben. A professor at the university in Toronto, Ben gets to know Jakob (or more precisely Jakob's *work*)⁵ through his close friend Maurice. When Jakob is killed in the car accident, it is Ben who goes to Idhra in search of his journals. It is also he who is responsible for publishing Beer's life story and who introduces the reader to Jakob's memoirs on the opening page. While he, then, undoubtedly plays a diegetically significant role, Ben's character is more than just functional in the Barthesian sense of the word.⁶ In fact, Ben's life narrative is one which in its own right undergirds the text's focus on exile and displacement.

The offspring of Holocaust survivors, Ben is born and raised in Toronto. Oscillating between life at home with his refugee parents and life on the outside, Ben never really feels at ease in either world. The main reason he feels out of place both at home and in Canadian society at large has to do with his parents' *apparently* odd behaviour. To start with, Ben tells us how his parents' eccentricities set them apart from the other families in the area. About growing up in the rural borough of Weston he says, "Our neighbours soon understood my parents wanted privacy" (243)—and this to such an extent that once when the Humber flooded, they ignored the knocking on the door as other residents desperately tried to warn them to evacuate their house. Further he tells us the reason he never took home any friends is that "I worried that our furniture was old and strange. I was ashamed by my mother's caution and need as she hovered" (229). That he is acutely aware of the stark contrast between the two worlds he lives in also comes to the fore when he talks about the time he introduced Naomi to his parents and describes how she "blundered in with her openness, her Canadian goodwill, with a seeming obliviousness to the fine lines of pain, the tenderly held bitterness, the mesh of collusions, the ornate restrictions" (248-249).

One cannot, of course, put down his parents' idiosyncratic ways to the mere fact that they are immigrants who are used to doing things differently where they come from. Instead, their overprotection and decision to keep to themselves are directly ascribable to the legacy of war. Put differently, ever since Ben's parents were rounded up and interred in a concentration camp during the second world war, they have lived in constant fear of being found out and killed. A legitimate fear, certainly, but one which has alienating consequences for their son who has to navigate between life at home and life on the outside. The disparity between the different worlds Ben moves between is epitomised by an incident which takes place when he is about nine years old. Ben relates how one day his father discovers a rotten apple in the garbage, fishes it out from the bin and forces Ben—amid tears, anger and vehement protest—to eat it. Ben realises that underlying his father's actions is the fact that he never had enough to eat during the war, that his relationship with food was not "merely a psychological difficulty, but also a moral one" (214). Nevertheless, the episode leaves an indelible print on the young child's mind and precipitates the estrangement between father and son.

⁵ Though the two protagonists do come face to face one night at a party, from Ben's recounting of the events it seems that it is his wife rather than he himself who engages in conversation with Jakob.

⁶ In "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes argues that "a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable" (1977: 89).

Another event which marks the deterioration in Ben's relationship with his parents is when he is allowed to go the Canadian National Exhibition as a schoolboy. While he avows to never having sensed "such exhilaration, such unmediated, anonymous belonging as that day in the crowd" (227), the true impact of the day is only felt when he comes home and shows his mother all the samples and free gifts he received. Horrified that Ben had 'mistakenly' taken them when he should not have, she makes him promise to hide them from his father. From this time on Ben feels more isolated than ever from his parents. He starts taking detours on his way home from school even though he knows that this is causing his mother profound distress. Though Ben is, then, not insensitive to his parents' suffering and understands why they behave the way they do, he still wants to liberate himself from their oppressive presence. This need to be free ultimately leads to his moving out of their home on the eve of his second year of university. After this he very rarely sees them but when he does go home for the occasional visit, he notices how the rift between them is becoming insurmountable. Because he feels unable or unwilling to do anything about it, he makes a conscious decision not to call them for weeks on end, realising full well that he is making them ill with worry. The *irony* is that Ben does not thereby manage to attain the happiness he is seeking. In fact, he starts feeling more and more unhappy the less he sees his parents. Besieged by self-pity he finally proclaims, "My efforts to free myself [have] created a deeper harm" (231).

For all his effort to escape familial displacement, and with that the legacy of exile and war, Ben finds himself hopelessly steeped in misery and isolation—while he feels awkward in his parental home, he is not entirely at ease in a life which excludes them either and is not as happy outside the family set-up as he thought he would be. What is more, Ben cannot successfully keep the outside and the familial world apart so that the estrangement he experiences at home is extended to the relations he has with other people, notably his wife. The fact that he grows up in a home "rotted out by grief" (233) where "love was like holding [one's] breath" (*ibid.*) finally takes its toll on his relationship with Naomi and is the reason he fails to return the love she shows towards him and his family. His driving her out of his life can therefore be seen as an indirect consequence of the war, of his parents' exile and of the grief-stricken home he grows up in. And although the book ends with him saying "I see I must give what I most need" (294), i.e. love, the alienation he suffers in terms of interpersonal and familial relations is positively crippling.

Untermensch

We have been looking at manifestations of displacement in *Fugitive Pieces* and have argued that the text depicts the inextricable link between exile and war. So far, war has been shown to leave desolation and alienation in its wake by dispossessing people of their land, their family and their language. Further, not fitting in with one's social surroundings was claimed to subject the exile to feelings of alienation and loss. In this section these effects will be enlarged upon by looking at how war strips its victims of any pride they might have in their cultural heritage. In what follows it will be argued that this often leads to the subject questioning his or her sense of identity, which in turn gives rise to issues of self-doubt and internal estrangement.

In their analysis of the nature of pluralistic societies and the dynamic interaction between ritual and identity, Platvoet and Van der Toorn have postulated that the individual's identity is bound up with that of the society he or she belongs to. They argue that although there is no such thing as one 'true' identity, a human being's overall sense of self is largely determined by their membership of a cultural group. They posit, "Identity is ... by definition social identity; and the combination of the two terms a pleonasm ... divorced from society, the individual is no one" (1995: 352). Since the individual's identity is so closely connected with the group they belong to, it can be concluded that having one's social identity challenged will leave the subject doubting his or her sense of being and self-worth. This notion is also put forward in Anne Michaels's novel—*Fugitive Pieces* emphasises not only the way in which our personal identity is tied up with that of the group but also comments on the consequences this might have. More specifically, it looks at how subjects are made to relinquish their dignity and humanity because they happen to belong to a certain race. It thematises the degradation and dehumanisation of particularly Jews during the war, and intimates that an individual's sense of self will be plunged into crisis when their people's collective identity is under threat.

There are a multitude of references in the book to Jews being treated as less than human. To begin with, the text depicts the way in which the National Socialist policy of *Entjudung* was executed.⁷ When the narrative starts we learn that Jakob's family was brutally killed and the Jewish Polish community they belonged to all but eradicated by the Germans. Then the focus shifts to Greece and to the Jews of Zakynthos who were made to flee their homes when Nazi soldiers invaded the island. We are told that when the Jewish population of the ghetto fled they vanished into the surrounding hills where they hid "in caves, in the sheds and animal stalls of the farms of Christian friends"(40). Here they crawled into "stables, pigsties, chicken coops" (45) and waited "like coral; half flesh, half stone" (40). The conspicuous use of animal imagery in relation to Jews resurfaces when the narrator compares Jews that were killed and interred in Auschwitz with the cave paintings of animals in Lascaux, and reinforced when we are informed that "the German language had annihilated metaphor, turning humans into objects" (143).

By using animals and objects as images, the narrative comments on the reification and dehumanisation of Jews during World War II. At the same time it invokes the ignominious practice of portraying Jews as parasites, vermin and other undesirable life forms. Toni Kaes points out that starting in medieval times, rats in particular were used in anti-Semitic imagery:

In caricatures and illustrations Jews were associated with rats as carriers of infectious diseases. Fritz Hippler's Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (*The Eternal Jew*, 1940), one of the most rabid anti-Semitic productions of Joseph Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda, cuts between images of Eastern Jews and rats to symbolize the spread of the "Jewish Plague."

(2009: 109)

As far as the figure of the 'eternal Jew' is concerned, Wolfgang Benz notes in *'Der ewige Jude'—Metaphern und Methoden nationalsozialistischer Propaganda* (2010) that it did not originate in the Third

⁷ Peter Longerich (2010) provides an in-depth study of the political decisions and background events leading up to the Holocaust. In *Holocaust—The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* he discusses the *Judenpolitik* of National Socialism and gives a detailed breakdown of the systematic extermination of Jews during the second world war.

Reich but had been around since the early Middle Ages, and originally denoted Jews exiled from Jerusalem. It was only in the nineteenth century when it started being used to transmit hostility towards the Jewish race that the term acquired pejorative connotations. This negative image of the eternal Jew was finally taken up by the National Socialist party and used in their anti-Semitic campaign. Benz writes that it was to 'prove' the thesis that Jews were subordinate to Nordic nations that the film *Der ewige Jude* was commissioned. To this end, imagery from the late-nineteenth century depicting Jews as parasites was developed and used by the film's director, Fritz Hippler; as viewers are subjected to a sequence of shots of 'typical Jews' the narrator informs them that Jews commonly live in filthy, neglected, bug-ridden dwellings and are constantly surrounded by the Plague.⁸ The idea advocated by the Nazis in this and other wartime material was, in brief, that Jews were a form of subhuman species or *Untermensch*. According to Benz this term, understood as the antipode to Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, was not coined by the Nazis either but had been in use since the 1920s to disseminate anti-Jewish and anti-Slavic propaganda. *Fugitive Pieces*, in depicting a world in which "a Jew could be purchased for a quart of brandy, perhaps four pounds of sugar, cigarettes" (45), comments on the little value such ideology attaches to human life. It shows a world where German soldiers, convinced of the other's inferiority, kill a Jewish woman point-blank in front of her family and friends, and throw a Jewish baby into the air just to shoot it down again "like a tin can" (46). The narrator, in an effort to make sense of it all, sets out fascist ideology and its justification in devaluing human life as follows:

Nazi policy was beyond racism, it was anti-matter, for Jews were not considered human. An old trick of language, used often in the course of history. Non-Aryans were never to be referred to as human, but as "figuren," "stücke"—"dolls," "wood," "merchandise," "rags." Humans were not being gassed, only "figuren," so ethics weren't being violated.

(165)

The Nazi directive against Jews owning pets, the narrator adds, was founded on the logic that an "insect or an object" (166) cannot own anything, that one "animal" (*ibid.*) cannot own another. He then goes on, however, to deconstruct Nazi thinking and claims that "If the Nazis required that humiliation precede extermination, then they admitted exactly what they worked so hard to avoid admitting: the humanity of the victim" (*ibid.*). In other words, the fact that they were treated as inferior proves more than annihilates the humanity of the prisoner, and shows that the perpetrator very well knew his victim was not a *Figur* (or a fugitive *piece*) but a person.

Though the narrator (Jakob) is able in hindsight to see that behind the degradation and slaughter of his people lies a perverted ideology, belonging to a group classified as *Untermensch* does not leave him unaffected. That he feels dehumanised because of his race can be inferred from the fact that he uses animal imagery also in relation to himself. When describing his escape from the Nazis he tells us that he was "Panting like a dog ... tears crawling like insects" (8, my emphasis) into his ears. The first time Athos came across Jakob we are told he "*squirmed* from the marshy ground" (5, my emphasis) and thumped his fist on his chest while crying out in Polish, German and Yiddish, "dirty Jew, dirty Jew, dirty Jew" (13). Shrewd

⁸ According to Annick Hillger (2000: 35), Jews in the Middle Ages were suspected of poisoning wells and bringing about the Plague. In the centuries that followed, the Jewish nation was labelled as bearers of death and disease, an image which was finally taken up by the Nazis in their campaign to 'prove' Jewish inferiority.

psychologist that he is, whenever Athos talks about that time he tells Jakob, “I knew you were human, just a child” (12) because he realises the boy needs to have his humanity reasserted.

The discussion above raises many questions about subjectivity, racism, ideology, propaganda, and the interaction between the individual and society (to name but a few). Obviously, the scope of this study is not such that it can pay due attention to the complexity of these issues. That should not stop us, however, from pointing out how the aforementioned aspects of war unite and lead to a kind of exile which is not geographical or linguistic but has to do with the subject’s search for his self. As evinced in the case of Jakob, because our individual identity is so closely bound up with that of the group, their being treated as sub-human can make us feel uncertain about our own humanity and self-worth, and ultimately lead to a crisis in identity. This means that war is injurious in more insidious ways than ‘just’ depriving victims of their land and their language. Indeed, the type of exile alluded to here is one that makes the individual doubt his very subjectivity, an exile that combines with dislocation and exclusion to make the refugee’s life one of desolation, despair and utter misery.

Transgenerational haunting

It has been claimed that because of the war Jakob is subjected to displacement and, with that, to alienation and degradation. Through his memoirs we are mimetically and diegetically made to see that man’s experience of war never ends with war, but that it is perpetuated in the form of exile, exclusion and self-doubt. This means that our past experiences are not something we can put ‘behind’ us. History in this sense never lets go but is something we carry with us all our lives. The way in which the past bears upon the present is, then, a leitmotif in the text. Yet there is more at stake in *Fugitive Pieces*; indeed, what Anne Michaels’s text illustrates so poignantly is that history also has a profound impact on the *future*. To be more precise, the text sets forth that the past returns (with a vengeance) and is revisited on those who are yet *to be* born:

History is the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater. It’s not the unknown past we’re doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future ... This is the duplicity of history: *an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected*. Out of fertile ground, the compost of history.

(161, my emphasis)

The passage above expounds the idea that history is that which will be resurrected. By dint of the fact that *Fugitive Pieces* is set against the backdrop of the second world war, the specific events of the past that are to be brought back to life and ‘thrown into the future’ will of necessity relate to the genocide of the Jews. Marianne Hirsch has written about how the events and experiences of the past—and specifically those associated with the Holocaust—are transmitted to successive generations. In her essay “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile” she talks about what happens when children inherit their parents’ diasporic past. Speaking of her own experiences as the daughter of exiled Jews, Hirsch remarks that she shares with her generation a sense of displacement even though they never knew nor were ever made to physically leave their parents’ country of birth. As such, the children of refugee parents are permanently removed from the

time and locus of the traumatic events of the past and can never really grasp the persecution their parents suffered. Though they do not have full access to these experiences and recollections, Hirsch nonetheless believes that by the sheer force of their parents' mourning and memory, something *like* memory is imparted to second-generation émigrés. To designate this type of second-generation recalling of the past she uses the term 'postmemory':

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can neither be fully understood nor re-created.

(1998: 420)

Fugitive Pieces takes up the concept of 'postmemory'. It shows that there is a need among Holocaust survivors to actively impart to their children the collective history of their people in addition to involuntary or subconsciously transmitting their fears and anxieties. The text also intimates that the necessity of postmemory has to do with the fact that past events need to be witnessed by the next generation if they are to have any meaning at all:

The event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed. Witnessed by those who lived near the incinerators, within the radius of the smell. By those who lived outside a camp fence, or stood outside the chamber doors. By those who stepped a few feet to the right of the station platform. *By those who were born a generation after.*

(162, my emphasis)

In the narrative the urge to make the past meaningful by having it witnessed is epitomised in Ben's parents. In spite of the fact that Ben grows up on a different continent and in a new era, at home the war is never far away. In fact, Ben's parents make a conscious effort to expose their son to the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust; he tells us that "Instead of hearing about ogres, trolls, witches, I heard disjointed references to kapos, haftlings, 'Ess Ess,' dark woods" (217). In an attempt to make his people's history also that of his son's, Ben's father uses visual images to confront him with the reality of the war:

The images my father planted in me were an exchange of vows. He passed the book or magazine to me silently ... What was I to make of the horror of those photos, safe in my room with the cowboy curtains and my rock collection? He thrust books at me with a ferocity that frightened me, I would say now, more than the images themselves. What I was to make of them, in my safe room, was clear. You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you.

(218-219)

In addition to being left disturbed and perplexed by these images, the episode above illustrates some of the reasons for Ben's alienation from his father who, in his ferocity, keeps his son at arm's length. The estrangement between father and son is further brought on by Ben's belief that he is not good enough for his dad, that he has "less power to please him than a stone" (219). In an effort to get closer, the child tries to be strong and brave like his father was during the war and sets himself a test—he decides to walk through the woods at night with no torch until he reaches the road. He reasons that "If my father could walk days, miles, then I could walk at least to the road. What would happen to me if I had to walk as far as my father had? I was in training" (220). However, on waking up the next morning and realising that his nightly adventure had

not in fact removed his anxiety, Ben slowly comes to understand that the fear he has inherited from his father is not something he can shake off but that it has indelibly become part of who he is.

Ben certainly appears to remain “tied to the evident effects of his parents’ suffering” (Gee, 2000: 23) for not only is he weighed down by their trauma and fear but also by their lack of (showing) emotion. As noted before, because he inherits his parents’ inability to openly display affection, Ben finds it almost impossible to maintain any type of intimate relations, be they familial or otherwise. For the absence of affection and intimacy in his family Ben blames the insidious nature of history which, he says, “[leaves] a space already fetid with undergrowth, worms chewing soil abandoned by roots” (233). Further he posits that “history only goes into remission, while it continues to grow in you until you’re silted up and can’t move” (243). History, then, has a way of subtly and stealthily infiltrating the subject, rendering him paralysed and helpless, incapable of escaping the burden of his parents’ past.

In her paper comparing the art of exile in *Fugitive Pieces* and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, Elisabeth Bronfen explores the idea of “transgenerational haunting” (2011). She claims that Ben is haunted by the memories he inherits from his parents and that he consequently suffers from a psychic or “second-hand” exile. Ben, in other words, is bequeathed with the legacy of banishment and flight; that is to say, though his experiences of the war and the persecution by the Nazis are vicarious they are also very real. This is why he can say that when the German soldier spat into his father’s mouth he also spat into his son’s. And this is also why he can say that his parents’ past—though circuitously and “molecularly” (280)—is also his own.

The living dead

Thus far it has been argued that war’s legacy is far-reaching and never-ending for those who have experienced it for themselves as well as those who are indirectly affected. Not only have we seen it lead to geographical dislocation, social exclusion and linguistic exile but also to alienated interpersonal relationships. Further we have said that it is not bound by time since the type of exile war gives rise to does not stop with first-generation émigrés but is carried over to their children and to their children’s children. Here it was pointed out that because the legacy of exile is perpetuated on both a physical and an emotional plane, first and second generation émigrés alike are bound to be subjected to feelings of anxiety and malaise. Now, before moving on to ascertain precisely how writing might express and even help ease such emotional distress, we will consider a final manifestation of exile, and turn our attention to war trauma.

Nowhere is the synthesis of war/exile and unease evinced more strikingly than in the case of trauma. In order to help us understand the link between war, exile and trauma, we need to look at what exactly is meant by ‘war trauma’ and especially at the symptoms commonly associated with it. According to Nigel Hunt, since war trauma covers such a broad spectrum of psychological disorders and since it has (to date) not been regarded as a psychiatric entity, a formal definition of the term as such does not exist. However, in *Memory, War and Trauma* Hunt loosely defines someone as being traumatised by war when they “cannot bear their memories of what has happened” (2010: 3). He further notes that those suffering from war trauma are generally diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which means that war trauma patients will show symptoms similar to patients with PTSD. These include intrusive and distressing recollections of

the past, recurrent dreams, flashbacks, illusions and difficulty in falling asleep. Hunt's findings correlate with those Dominick LaCapra makes in his essay on Holocaust testimonies and the important role they play in understanding the past. In "Holocaust Testimonies: Attending to the Victim's Voice," LaCapra puts forward "nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety-attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior" (2003: 212) as some of the ways in which traumatic memory might be relived in the present, and adds that these instances of recalling the past are often beyond the individual's control.

To bring all of this in relation to *Fugitive Pieces*, the notion that war trauma leads to the subject uncontrollably and repeatedly experiencing the past in a conscious as well as in an unconscious state is underscored by having Jakob continuously relive the violent killing of his people. Despite his efforts to bury the past and keep the dead at bay, they keep reappearing while he is asleep *and* while he is awake. As far as his dreams are concerned, he tells us that alone at night in his bed those who were killed "simply rose, shook the earth from their clothes and waited" (93). The grotesque and ghastly aspect the dead acquire in his dreams is indicative of the extent to which Jakob is haunted by their suffering and pain:

They waited until I was asleep, then roused themselves, exhausted as swimmers, grey between the empty trees. Their hair in tufts, open sores where ears used to be, grubs twisting from their chests. The grotesque remains of incomplete lives, the embodied perplexity of desires eternally denied. They floated until they grew heavier, then began to walk, heaving into humanness; *until they grew more human than phantom* and through their effort began to sweat. The strain poured from my skin, until I woke dripping with their deaths.

(24, my emphasis)

The Freudian claim that every dream is a wish-fulfilment is well known. However, considering that he is literally haunted by the dead in his dreams, one cannot help but wonder how this might be true for Jakob. An anecdote in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which relates the story of a father who falls asleep and has a dream shortly after his child dies, might offer us some insight here. The story goes that in his dream the man sees the child by his bedside, clutching an arm and reproaching him for not noticing that he is burning. Startled, the father wakes up to find that one of the candles in the adjacent room has fallen and has burnt the child's arm. Considering that there was a fire right next door to the room the man was sleeping in, Freud asks why he dreamed on instead of waking up immediately. He points out that in the dream the child behaved as though he were alive and postulates that it was in order to have his child with him a bit longer that the father was not roused from his sleep. Freud concludes, "The dream was given precedence over waking reflection because it was able to show the child still living" (1997: 354). Jakob's dreams, it seems, might be explained in a similar way for by dreaming of the dead he too can keep them alive a little bit longer. Thus, though they are maimed and almost menacing in their reproof, they are nonetheless alive and even 'human'.

It is, then, because the dead in his dreams are not dead but 'heave into humanness' as it were that we can say Jakob's dreams become a wish-fulfilment. However, as intimated before, the dead are not only kept alive at night. While they acquire a human-like quality in Jakob's dreams, when he is awake they literally *intrude* into the present and become part of his reality. A case in point is when he describes how as a child "the room filled with shouts" (43) of Jews who were being tortured and killed and how he had "heard in [his] head their cries" (76). Writing his memoirs on the island of Idhra many years later, he still senses the presence of the

dead so keenly that he succumbs to their sounds. About this time he writes, “the cries ... grew louder, filled my head. I moved closer inside myself, didn’t turn away. I clutched the sides of the desk and was pulled into blueness. I lost myself, discovered the world could disappear” (157). This insistence of the dead to acquire physical presence is nowhere manifested as hauntingly as in the figure of his sister. As was the case with the Jews of the concentration camps, Bella’s dream-image is grotesque. Hers is “a round face, a doll’s face, immobile, inanimate, her hair floating behind her” (44), “her skin ... coming apart at her elbows and behind her ears ... the cuts on [her] head burning ... every raw place on her scalp [bursting] with cold” (168). In keeping with the other living dead, she too becomes lifelike not only in his sleep but also while he is awake:

Athos didn’t understand, as I hesitated in the doorway, that I was letting Bella enter ahead of me, making sure she was not left behind ... Awake at night, I’d hear her breathing or singing next to me in the dark, half comforted, half terrified that my ear was pressed against the thin wall between the living and the dead, that the vibrating membrane between them was so fragile. I felt her presence everywhere, in daylight, in rooms I knew weren’t empty. I felt her touch on my back, my shoulders, my hair.

(31)

Bella, it seems, will not let go. Pithily Jakob writes, “Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me” (24). One reason for Bella’s relentless haunting is to be found in the way she disappeared. Not knowing what happened to her after the German soldiers took her away, Jakob ceaselessly replays the possible scenarios of her fate. “Night after night,” he tells us, “I endlessly follow Bella’s path from the front door of my parents’ house ... I collect facts, trying to reconstruct events in minute detail. Because Bella might have died anywhere along that route. In the street, in the train, in the barracks” (139). Such is the extent to which Jakob is haunted by her death that when Alex moves in he detects her presence in his wife’s every move—Alex’s silk robe draped over the bathroom door becomes his “sister’s ghost” (125), her bobby pins Bella’s hairclips, her touch Bella writing on his back, her whispering goodnight “Bella reminding [him] that even Beethoven never stayed up past ten o’clock” (140).

Though Jakob, in his internalisation of Bella, displays symptoms of melancholia,⁹ he *does* realise that he needs to let go of the dead if he wants to be restored to the present. On fleeing his house after seeing his parents’ corpses he experiences “flesh transforming to spirit” (7), and subsequently senses “The dead ... above [him], weird haloes and arcs smothering the stars” (ibid.). This allows him to posit, in a vein reminiscent of Blanchot, that the dead “are everywhere but the ground” (8), that is, though they are buried and out of sight they are very much present.¹⁰ While hiding in the bog he feels his mother’s presence and understands that she wants to say goodbye. He knows that he should allow her to do so, that it would be “a

⁹ Freud writes in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) that struggling to let go of a loved one is not an uncommon phenomenon. While mourning describes the normal process in which the subject successfully comes to terms with the loss of a family member or friend, melancholia refers to a pathological disposition. When in mourning, the bereaved applies a reality test and realises that the love object is no longer there. As a result, he or she withdraws their libido towards the deceased. Both mourning and melancholia are characterised by a loss of interest in the outside world, but the difference is that the melancholic displays a loss of self-regard. Freud postulates, “In mourning it is the world who has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (246). The melancholic patient feels worthless and reproaches, even vilifies, himself; he refuses to eat and is plagued by sleeplessness. The explanation Freud offers for this is that the loved one has been internalised and that one part of the ego has set itself against the other. Therefore, though the patient might speak of the loss of a loved one, the analyst will detect the loss of ego.

¹⁰ In “Two Versions of the Imaginary,” Maurice Blanchot posits that the mortal remains of a dead person never stays in the place allotted to it (i.e. the coffin or the grave). He writes, “The spot [the cadaver] occupies is dragged along by it ... the power of death causes it to leave the fine place that has been assigned to it. Even though the cadaver is tranquilly lying in state on its bier, it is also everywhere in the room, in the house. At any moment, it can be elsewhere than where it is, where we are without it, where there is nothing, *an invading presence*, an obscure and vain fullness” (1981: 84, my emphasis).

sin to keep her from ascending" (ibid.). Hence his assertion that to imagine his sister into being is to "blaspheme" (167), and that "to remain with the dead is to abandon them" (170). He maintains, "The soul leaves the body instantly, as if it can hardly wait to be free" (7) and believes "that it was as painful for [the dead] to be remembered as it was for [him] to remember them" (25). Jakob, in other words, fears that because he is unable to release the dead he is haunting them as much as he is being haunted by them. He consequently realises that the reason Bella wants to "push him back into the world" (170) is not only so that he may seize the present but that she may be set free.

War and exile combine to traumatise Jakob. In his sleeping as in his waking hours, the dead haunt him to such an extent that the borders between the real and the imaginary world become blurred. Because he keeps seeing the dead everywhere he goes, he cannot live his present life to the full. At the same time, since he is *not* dead himself, he cannot join the realm of the deceased. This means that Jakob is relegated to the margins of both the real *and* the unreal world, his spiritual exile superimposing itself on his geographic displacement. The unease Jakob experiences is therefore not only in consequence of his nightmares and flashbacks, but also because of the fact that he does not feel he wholly belongs to either the realm of the living or of the dead. Admittedly, Jakob ultimately does find his place in the world. However, this is not until much later in life when he meets Michaela. With her help the dead are finally put to rest, and the real and the imaginary no longer conflated. Though he tells us that his wife's mundane actions such as baking a pie "carry [his] memories" (192) and remind him of his mother and of Bella, Jakob can clearly keep his memories apart from the reality which is Michaela. More significantly, when it gets dark, he is no longer afraid, for instead of nightmares now "night after night ... happiness awakes [him]" (194).

Do not forget

We have seen Jakob struggling to come to terms with the fate that befell his people. Troubled at night by grotesque images of the tortured and the slain, and haunted during the day by the physical proximity of the dead, he finds it almost impossible to lay their ghosts to rest. While it has been established that towards the end of his life he finally manages to let go of the past, this does not mean that he forgets or obliterates it. Indeed, remembering the past turns out to be the main reason for compiling his memoirs. So, before moving on to enquire how exactly the memoir genre has been appropriated to effectively convey exilic experiences, we first need to look into this and other reasons the text suggests why it is important to write one's life narrative. In what follows the why and wherefore of both Jakob *and* Ben's writing their memoirs will be discussed in more detail. In short it will be maintained that the text indicates writing enables the individual not only to rescue the past from oblivion but that it also helps him to deal with trauma as well as with issues of guilt and remorse.

As intimated above, what becomes clear in the text is that the past needs to be recollected if one wants to go on living in the present. While there are people like Alex who think that by forgetting we are returned to life, there are clear indications that repressing the past will slow down and hinder the healing process. Thus, though remembering is "impossible, absurd" (30), Jakob believes forgetfulness is a serious threat to one's self for, as he sees it, "each time a memory or a story slinks away, it takes more of [one] with it" (144). If the

past, in other words, remains invisible or unsaid it will continue to hold sway over the subject who, as a result, “becomes undone by a smell, a word, a place” (17). The notion that life might be seized by recalling the past is also put forward by Athos, a firm believer of the idea that it is only by remembering that we can secure our future. For this reason, every time he makes Jakob review the Hebrew alphabet he says to him, “It’s your future you are remembering” (21). Athos moreover encourages Jakob to *record* the recollected events of his childhood. “Write to save yourself,” (165) Athos tells him, all the while emphasising “the power of language to restore” (79). He instructs him to “find a way to make beauty necessary ... a way to make necessity beautiful” (44) and succeeds in convincing Jakob that “A poem is as neural as love” (163), and that language should be wielded in order to deal with the past.

The idea of constructing a coherent narrative to make sense of one’s traumatic past is not new. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, for example, have posited that “Narrators suffering from traumatic or obsessional memory may see the act of telling as therapeutic in resolving troubled memories” (2010: 28). Likewise, in her work on the important role trauma played in the memoir-boom of the late twentieth century, Leigh Gilmore has claimed that often “language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma” (2001: 6). This is certainly the case in a text such as *Fugitive Pieces* which celebrates the power language has to restore, not least of all by making Jakob come to understand that writing will allow him to process past events. As has been noted before, compiling his memoirs in English affords him the distance and perspective he needs to revisit the past. The key role writing plays in Jakob’s life is underscored by the intimate relation he has with language. When Ben starts reading his poetry, he is struck by the fact that what Jakob wrote made up such a big part of who he was. He asks, “How could it be otherwise, for a man who claimed to believe so completely in language? Who knew that even one letter—like the “J” stamped on a passport—could have the power of life or death” (207). Considering these findings, it is not surprising that Ben is tempted to believe (as perhaps is the reader) that it was ultimately “language itself [which] had freed [Jakob]” (207). This, however, is not completely accurate since it is ultimately Michaela’s love (more than writing per se) that finally accounts for Jakob’s finding inner peace.

While it might be true for Jakob, in Ben’s case it is not loving someone but rather the very act of writing which helps him to deal with the past. To be more precise, it is through writing his life story in quasi-epistolary form that Ben is finally restored—by addressing Jakob, Ben can put his life story into a coherent narrative, and in this way get to know his self. The idea of a talking cure, with Jakob taking over the role of analyst and Ben of analysand, is put forward by Ben himself. When he and Naomi meet Jakob for the first time, Ben is affected by Jakob’s ability to listen and not condemn:

Tell him, I thought, tell him everything. You listened, not like a priest who listens for sin, but like a sinner, who listens for his own redemption. What a gift you had for making one feel clear, for making one feel—clean. As if talking could actually heal.

(208)

Ben’s professed scepticism that talking can heal is in contrast with what is finally accomplished by his relating his life story. As the concluding paragraphs indicate, it is through giving an account of his past that

he is finally able to make sense of his life and that he comes to understand that he needs to love in order to be loved:

But *now* ... I see something else. My mother stands behind my father and his head leans against her. As he eats, she strokes his hair. Like a miraculous circuit, each draws strength from the other.

I see I must give what I most need.

(294, my emphasis)

The realisation that he must give that which he is in need of himself does not come easily. As did Jakob, Ben gains self-knowledge by working through the distressing experiences of the past. Interspersing the search for Jakob's notebooks with personal anecdotes, Ben posits, "The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens" (213). He then goes on to say that these memories—painful as they might be—must be recalled and dealt with if one wants to live life in the present. Much like "The misery of bones that must be broken in order to be set straight" (254), the wounds of the past need to be opened up if they are ever to heal.

At first, the painful memories and wounds of the past seem to relate exclusively to the anger Ben harbours towards his parents. As the narrative progresses it becomes clear, however, that he feels guilty as much as he feels angry about the estranged relationship with his mother and father. Though Ben realises that his parents have (in some ways) failed him, he also feels that he has failed *them*. After they pass away he reproaches himself for not having had more compassion and more comprehension for the fact that their ordeal had made them into the people they were. In this respect, Barbara Estrin has argued that "in his memory, Ben puts himself in the subject position of his father. He is Laios, killed by the son he was. And the guilt does not leave him" (2002: 286-284). A case in point is when he thinks about the time he started taking detours on his way back from school and confesses, "I'd like to think I didn't know at the time how cruel this was. When my father and I left the apartment in the morning, my mother never felt sure we'd return at all" (229). He also feels guilty about shutting his parents out of his life when he was at university, which he declares had "given them ... a new scar" (231). Besides these revelations, Ben's compunction about not being there for his parents is evinced in his dreams:

My dreams are silent. I watch my father lean over the table to kiss my mother, she's too frail to sit up long. I think: Don't worry, I'll comb your hair, I'll carry you from the bed, I'll help you—and realize she doesn't know me. In dreams, my father's face ... contorts ... In dreams I can't stop his disintegration.

(249)

In addition to showing remorse about his parents, Ben regrets the way he treated Naomi. Though he loves her, she is made to bear the brunt of the complicated and imperfect relationship he has with his parents. He is unfairly and unreasonably annoyed by the fact that she seems to unconditionally love them and is also jealous of the bond she has with his mother. Displeased with his parents for raising him not to be able to give love as freely as Naomi, Ben starts to take his anger out on her. At the same time he is worried that he will lose her and tells us, "I began to be afraid. So I picked fights with her over everything" (242). When it finally transpires that Naomi had known his parents had had two children before the war while he himself was kept

in the dark, Ben has a good excuse to push her out of his life. It is only later on the island of Idhra when he is able to sort out his emotions by writing about them that he confesses, “I wasted love, I wasted it” (286).

All of this is to say that writing affords Ben the opportunity to express his regrets and to help him deal with his feelings of guilt. But Ben is not the only person in the text who has the need to expiate. In fact, guilt—or more precisely, a strong sense of responsibility towards the past—is also a motivating force behind Jakob’s writing. What troubles Jakob so exceedingly is the fact that while he survived the war, there were millions of Jews who did not:

While I hid in the radiant light of Athos’s island, thousands suffocated in darkness. While I hid in the luxury of a room, thousands were stuffed into baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins.

(45)

Thinking of his fellow-Jews who were killed in the gas chambers, he addresses the unborn children whose mothers died while giving birth and implores them, “Forgive me, you who were born and died without being given names” (168). Such feelings of remorse, as Martin Tucker has noted, are not uncommon among refugees who have managed to escape persecution and death. Referring to the work Leszek Kolakowski has done on this subject Tucker remarks, “[the] refugee may harbor guilt for having fled and survived, while those left behind ... may have suffered imprisonment or death” (1991: xvi). This is certainly true for Jakob who has such a strong sense of responsibility for having escaped while others perished that he feels it is his *duty* to remember them. As will presently be argued in more detail, it is precisely the act of writing which makes it possible for Jakob to make amends and appease his conscience. Providing him with a means of ensuring that those who ‘died without being given names’ are never forgotten, language allows Jakob to fulfil his moral obligation towards the dead. In this way he is able to move a few steps closer towards putting the past to rest, that is, towards finding inner peace.

Silence

It has been suggested that writing their memoirs enables Ben and Jakob to express their remorse about the past. It has also been maintained that language has healing properties and that recording past events might help restore the subject to spiritual wholeness. What still needs to be added is that writing is a way of giving a voice to the oppressed and the subjugated. In what follows we will first consider what the text has to say about how language might eradicate silence, and then ask to what extent it also *enacts* the notion of using the written word to lend a voice to victims of war. It is only then that will we be in a position to see how *Fugitive Pieces* performs that which it professes, and why it chooses no other genre but fictional memoir to do so. This, in turn, will help lay the foundation we need to claim that memoir and exile collude to make the reader share in the protagonists’ experiences of malaise, separation and loss.

To elucidate how silenced voices can be restored, an analysis of the omnipresent manifestation of voicelessness will serve as our point of departure. Silence features strongly in the narrative, and both Ben and Jakob are negatively affected by it. We are first introduced to the menacing nature of silence when Jakob relates how he hid in the closet while Nazis stormed their house and killed his parents. Since Jakob only hears these events as they take place and does not actually see them happening, he necessarily relies on his

aural senses. This is why he says, "My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground" (17).¹¹ From within his hiding place in the wall the boy is traumatised by the sounds of soldiers forcing their way into the house and assaulting his family:

The burst door. Wood ripped from hinges, cracking like ice under the shouts. Noises never heard before,
torn from my father's mouth. *Then silence.*

(7, my emphasis)

This final lack of sound turns out to be even more terrifying—and indeed *terrorising*—than any of the noises Jakob actually perceives for the dead (as we have seen) inexorably and relentlessly haunt him for the best part of his life. Notably it is the silence and uncertainties surrounding Bella's death which plague Jakob the most. "Filled with her silence, [and having] no choice but to imagine her face" (10), Jakob starts seeing Bella everywhere he goes, in his sleeping as well as in his waking hours. This imagining of his sister and his parents, and concomitant conflation of the past and the present, finally take on such dimensions that he finds it virtually impossible to let go of the past or surrender to the present.

Jakob fears losing his family to an all-encompassing silence; he tells us "each time a memory or a story [slinked] away" (144) it would take some of him with it, and that panic would spread through his body when he thought about the fact that "the past was [being] silenced" (92). Considering these fears, it is ironic that Jakob at first believes his own life cannot "be stored in any language but only in silence" (111), and wishes that he "could disappear simply by stillness" (18). Later, however, he discovers that remaining silent is more harmful than helpful, and consequently turns to writing about the past in order to save himself. That is to say, he finally comes to realise that only once language replaces silence can one start to make sense of the past:

I did not know how to seek by way of silence [so] I thought of writing poems ... in code ... so that loss would wreck the language, become the language. If one could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming ... So in poems I returned to Biskupin, to the house on Zakynthos, to the forest, to the river, to the burst door, to the minutes in the wall.

(111-112)

With Jakob we are made to see that while language restores, silence incapacitates and disempowers. This notion is reinforced in the second part of the book by having Ben's character introduce a somewhat different (if equally debilitating) manifestation of silence. Similar to Jakob, Ben realises full well the havoc silence can wreak; he tells us that he was "born into absence" (233), and this mainly for two reasons. First of all, due to the ordeal they suffered at the hands of the Nazis during the war, his parents are constantly 'in hiding' lest they be detected by the authorities and rounded up (again). Second, though they demand that he know all about the Holocaust, Ben's parents are loath to tell him their personal stories and hence remain secretive about the life they had before they moved to Canada. As a result, silence and secrets engulf them as a family and characterise the relationships they have with each other. A case in point is Ben's father who makes use of orchestral music (in lieu of language) in order to communicate with his son. Using "other people's arms

¹¹ Adrienne Kertzer believes that Jakob's not actually witnessing the events is central to the novel. A Holocaust survivor's child herself, Kertzer makes a case for reading *Fugitive Pieces* not as a romantic and redemptive narrative but as focussing on the trauma of listening. She argues that Jakob is "Michaels's figure for the image-haunted listener of the second generation" (2000: 201), a figure in which she also sees her own reflection.

and hands and breath” (215) to signal, music becomes “a wordless entreaty, all meaning pressed into chords” (ibid.). Ben’s mother, on the other hand, (initially) still shares some of her secrets with Ben, and tells him—in confidence—some of what they went through during the war. As Ben gets older, however, his mother becomes more and more secretive as she makes him promise to keep all sorts of things from his father. In the end, as a consequence of the increasingly complex “code of silence” (223) enforced at home, Ben is completely estranged from his parents. That Ben is very much aware of this is evinced in the following passage:

There was no energy of a narrative in my family ... Instead, our words drifted away ... My parents and I waded through damp silence, of not hearing and not speaking. It soaked into the furniture, into my father’s dank armchair, a mildew in the walls. We communicated by slight gestures, surgeons in an operating theatre.

(204)

From the above it is clear that Ben becomes endowed with his parents’ silence, much in the same way we saw him inheriting their inability to display affection. In fact, so much does Ben internalise their silence that when he meets Naomi he considers the absence of speech to make up an important and indispensable part of their relationship. He describes Naomi’s silence as “wise” (208) and almost seems relieved that she ‘knows’ when *not* to speak. In the end, though, Ben is made to see that living a life of silence is not conducive to having a close relationship, but that it has actually alienated him from his wife. As we have seen, it is only once he discovers the power of language and starts writing about his past that Ben gains this type of insight and that he realises the damage that has been done. It is only then that he can say that he has wasted love and that he must give that which he is most in need of himself.

The debilitating effects of silence do not only bear upon Jakob and Ben but concern all those affected by the war, and foremost the Jews detained and killed in concentration camps. Their persecution and silencing make up an integral part of the text and allusions to the Holocaust saturate the narrative. To begin with there is a focus on Poland as we learn how the Nazis tortured and killed Jakob’s family and friends. The text also depicts how, in other parts of the country, Jews were subjected to a similar fate—while mothers in Łódź witnessed their babies being murdered, and inmates at Gollerschau were forced to demolish Hebrew cemeteries, in the village of Odessa “thirty thousand Jews were ... doused with gasoline and burned alive” (26). Further we learn that thousands of kilometres away, in Greece, the Nazis equally persisted in their fanatic efforts to exterminate the Jews. We are told that while most inhabitants of the Zakynthos ghetto were able to escape to the hills when the Germans invaded the island, those that were *not* were rounded up and taken away to concentration camps, much like the Jews living on other Greek isles such as Corfu and Crete. In addition to Poland and Greece mention is made of the Jewish persecution in, amongst others, the Czech Republic, Belarus, Italy, Germany and the Ukraine. Precisely because the witch hunt for Jews was taking place not only in these countries but all over the continent, Jewish fugitives are said to have filled “the corners and cracks of Europe, every available space” (45) as they looked for a place to hide.

Of all the disturbing details surrounding the incarceration and murder of these European Jews—what they were doing when the soldiers arrested them, whether they were separated, and where they were taken—Jakob singles out the precise moment of death as the most troubling, and is obsessed to know “were they

silent or did they speak? Were their eyes open or closed?" (140). Because he desperately, but unsuccessfully, tries to imagine "the trauma of their hearts" (147), Jakob has a "hunger for sound ... almost as sharp as desire" (163). He knows that those who were murdered must have cried out but says, "It is impossible to imagine those sounds" (168). He concludes that since what the SS performed were "unspeakable acts," (166) to capture in writing what their victims had gone through is a near impossible task.

In a short essay on poetic language and memory entitled "Cleopatra's Love," Anne Michaels writes that "The inevitable failure of language haunts integrity" (1995: 178)—an assertion not only reflected in Jakob's concern that words can never fully capture the horror of war but also in the widely-accepted notion that trauma is fundamentally unrepresentable and beyond language (Gilmore, 2001: 6).¹² In this respect, Shoshana Felman points out in *The Juridical Unconscious* the seemingly hopeless task Holocaust victims had during trials held in the wake of the second world war to articulate the atrocities of what they had witnessed and experienced in the concentration camps. Felman claims that since the only language available to express the ungraspable events of the past was that of the oppressor, these witnesses were literally robbed of their language. With this in mind she turns her attention to the Eichmann trial and argues that its function was precisely "to invent and to articulate from scratch" (126) a *new* language in which these experiences *could* be expressed. Because it created a vernacular in which Jewish victims could talk about what had happened, she concludes that the Eichmann trial became "a legal process of translation of thousands of private, secret traumas into one collective, public and communally acknowledged one" (124).

The Eichmann trial is a contribution to collective memory because it finds a way to give those silenced a voice and to ensure that their stories are not forgotten. On the issue of collective memory, Schiff, Noy and Cohler have claimed that the voice or the "spirit of an era and social group" (2001: 160) might be conveyed in and through the life story of an individual. In their work on life narratives of Holocaust survivors they identify what they call 'collected' stories, that is, stories included in the individual's personal narrative but which refer to vicarious, indirect experiences. They believe the reason these stories are told as if they were part of the subject's own history is not only because they help constitute the collective past but also because they are "personally salient and ... important" (160) and "central to one's [own] understanding of the past" (161). The idea of contributing to the collective memory of a people while at the same time trying to understand one's immediate past is epitomised in *Fugitive Pieces* by having Jakob's memoirs comprise his own as well as 'collected stories' of those Jews who were tortured and killed in the war. In this way, writing allows him not only to make sense of the traumatic events of his own life but also to capture the collective history of his people. In the end Jakob, then, achieves a tremendous feat for his memoirs create a platform where silenced voices are restored and once-forgotten stories heard. Realising full well—along with the author and the reader—that language can never quite express the trauma of war, his journals are nevertheless

¹² Méira Cook has argued that Anne Michaels attends to literature's inability to convey the horrors of the Holocaust by writing in densely metaphoric language. She posits that Michaels's poetic style of writing is at odds with the traumatic events that are being narrated, and that the resulting clash induces the reader to feel uneasy and disconcerted. She adds, however, that while the use of metaphor to recount the atrocities of the war has an estranging effect and is, at such, a successful attempt at imparting to the reader that which is unrepresentable, the use of that very poetic language in the romantic subplot seems contrived and overly sentimental (2000: 12-22).

an attempt “to honour every inch of flesh in words” (163), “to set down the past in the cramped space of a prayer” (191).

Ghetto diaries

In the discussion above, *Fugitive Pieces* was said to depict silence as incapacitating and as adversely affecting the lives of imaginary characters in the text as well as persons living in the actual world outside the text. It was also posited that language is pitted against such debilitating silence and put forward as a means of giving a voice to the dead. Thus the narrative seems to suggest that silenced voices might be reinstated and discarded life stories posthumously heard through the act of writing. In what follows it will be argued that the text does not merely suggest but in fact *exhorts* the living to recall and even recreate the lives of those who passed away. Further, seeing that it executes this type of rescue action itself, *Fugitive Pieces* will be claimed to profess as well as perform the way writing can reinstate the mute and the dead. Finally, with an eye to analysing the enmeshment of autobiography and war/exile in more detail later, the role that memory and memoir play in helping to achieve this end will be looked at more closely.

A good starting point for all of this is Jakob’s strong sense of obligation to the past and his conviction that an event is only meaningful when it is witnessed by someone, that is, when it is given presence. Jakob believes that writing about what happened can give meaning to the lives of those who passed away; he declares, “There’s no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it’s given a use” (193). While history cannot be stopped or changed, Jakob feels that by remembering the events of the past we are doing as our conscience demands:

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. History is the Totenbuch, The Book of the Dead, kept by the administrators of the camps. Memory is the Memorbucher, the names of those to be mourned, read aloud in the synagogue. (138)

Encouraged in his thinking by Athos,¹³ Jakob believes it is the responsibility of the living to honour the dead by remembering them. At the same time he realises the enormity of this task and asks, “How can one man take on the memories of even one other man, let alone five or ten or a thousand or ten thousand; how can they be sanctified each?” (52). To help us reconstruct the lives of those who have passed away he suggests we turn to nature, which he believes contains traces of human memory. By scrutinising the earth and the air around us, the lives of those who died in the war can be reconstituted. Indeed, “Though they were taken blind, though their senses were confused by stench and prayer and screams, by terror and memories, these passengers found their way home. Through the rivers, through the air” (52) and, we might add, through Jakob’s writing.

In addition to encoding “Human memory ... in air currents and river sediment” (53), the text suggests that the passing on of “family stories [and] the names of relatives” (40) might also be achieved by other, less

¹³ The ways in which Athos urges Jakob to commemorate the dead include organising a ceremony for Jakob’s parents and for all those Jews “who have no one to recall their names” (75). He further instructs Jakob to do good on their behalf for his “good deeds will help the moral progress of the dead” (ibid.). Presciently, Athos declares that writing about the past will do more than help Jakob save only himself, that one day Jakob will write “because [he’s] *been* saved” (165, my emphasis).

abstract, means such as the oral tradition or the burying and excavation of memorabilia. In a seminal passage the narrator describes how during the war Jews would inter their valuables to save them from being confiscated and destroyed by the Nazis:

In the zudeccha, the Spanish sliver siddur with hinges in the spine, the tallith and candlesticks are being buried in the earth under the kitchen floor. Letters to absent children, photos, are buried. While the men and women who place these valuables in the ground have never done so before, they go through the motions with centuries of practice guiding their hands, a ritual as familiar as the Sabbath ... All across Europe there's such buried treasure. A scrap of lace, a bowl. *Ghetto diaries that have never been found.*
(39-40, my emphasis)

This passage intimates (in keeping with contemporary life writing theory)¹⁴ that a person's life narrative need not take on the conventional form but may be contained in letters, photos and other personal effects. Significantly, these 'ghetto diaries' are invoked on the very first page of the novel where we are informed that while some were found, many were destroyed in the war or simply never discovered:

During the Second World War, countless manuscripts—diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts—were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden—buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors—by those who did not live to retrieve them. Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone.

To reiterate, it is through analysing traces in physical matter as well as retrieving personal documents that Jakob suggests recollecting the lives of those who perished in the war. Though he realises no one can "take on the memories of even one other man" (52), this does not stop him from writing about the dead or from trying to "honour every inch of flesh in words" (163). Clearly, this kind of attempt at recalling the memories of the dead can never be completely factual but must of necessity involve elements of fabrication. Now, while some might outright reject such a rendition of history on the basis that it is not entirely accurate, there is a case to be made for the validity of using one's imagination to recreate past events. On the historical import that conjecturing the past does or does not have, Mark Freeman has postulated that since remembering is always a subjective and selective process, and since recollecting the past will inevitably involve "distortions and falsifications" (1993: 8), it is questionable whether a fictional account of the past is less effectual in portraying human suffering than any 'factual' one.¹⁵ Geoffrey Hartman (quoted in Schiff, Noy, and Cohler) concurs that just because a depiction of the past happens to be fictitious this does not mean that it has no truth-value. Referring specifically to fictionalised accounts of the events surrounding the second world war, Hartman posits that the veracity of these narratives lies not so much in their factuality as in the speaker's ability to "keep the emotional experience of the Holocaust survivors before our eyes as an object of consideration" (2001: 163). In similar vein Janet Gunn has posited that although the past might not

¹⁴ Smith and Watson note that the term 'life narrative' refers to both written as well as oral autobiographical acts, and that it may be found in diverse media including texts, films and photographs (2010: 4).

¹⁵ Lawrence Langer has written on the type of distortions and falsifications that might occur in actual accounts of the genocide. Having examined countless videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors, Langer notes that mainly due to the time lapse between the actual event and the recounting thereof, factual errors are bound to occur when such testimonies are given. He emphasises, however, that "the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy" (1991: xv), and that if we discard testimonies because they are not entirely accurate, we might end up with "a permanent hole in the ozone layer of history" (ibid.).

be completely explicit in texts, this does not mean it cannot be *experienced*. Writing on how autobiography in particular can ‘exhume’ past events and make us relive them in the present, Gunn claims that “just because all of the past cannot be presented does not mean that it is therefore absent from the autobiographical text” (1982: 14). What Jakob’s memoirs bring to the fore is that even though ‘all of the past’ can never be known it can still be remembered and experienced by dint of the written word. Succinctly put, in writing about war victims and invoking their memories, the dead can be reinstated and the past given presence.

Because Jakob’s journals call to mind the dead and ‘keep before our eyes’ the happenings of the past, we can say that they execute an act of exhumation, not unlike Athos’s archaeological work. Both experts in digging up buried and forgotten lives, Jakob tells us that he and Athos “would come to share [their] secrets of the earth,” that their “tasks became the same” (49). In particular, it is their common interest in bog people which allows for a compelling analogy—Athos’s fascination with the exhumation of men and women sacrificed in peat moors is comparable to Jakob’s urge to dig up and recall the memories of those killed in the war. Using his memoirs as a platform to give a voice to the Jews silenced during the Holocaust, he makes certain that their collective life story is preserved for posterity.¹⁶ To bring this in relation to the initial analogy between archaeology and writing, it might be ventured that by committing their story to paper, war victims and their life narratives are kept intact for centuries, much like bog bodies who “outlast their killers—whose bodies have long dissolved to dust” (ibid.).

Significantly, Jakob’s character literally embodies the trope of the bog person. The first time Athos sees him he is described as a “Bog-boy” (5) surfacing into the streets from the swamp “like Tollund Man, Grauballe Man, like the boy they uprooted in the middle of Franz Josef street while they were repairing the road” (ibid.). Coming out of the moor, dripping with “prune-coloured juices of the peat-sweating bog. Afterbirth of earth” (ibid.), Jakob is re-born, plucked by Athos—in the role of surrogate parent—“From out of his trousers” (14). Of his rescue Jakob says, “No one is born just once. If you’re lucky, you’ll emerge again in someone’s arms” (5), and it is plain to see how his own good fortune at being given a new life is related to his determination to excavate the memories of those killed in the war. What needs to be stressed is that by reinstating the dead Jakob is undermining the actions of those who drove them to their graves. Put differently, by giving a voice to Holocaust victims Jakob is contesting their silencing and launching a counter-attack on their killers. Karin Sanders has written on the idea of using bog bodies to challenge a given rule or regime—and specifically Nazi ideology—in *Bodies in the Bog and the Archaeological Imagination*. In a section devoted to the political use and abuse of mummified bodies, Sanders remarks that they feature in a speech Heinrich Himmler delivered to the Waffen-SS in 1937. According to Sanders the image of the bog body is used in Himmler’s rhetoric to represent those regarded as ‘degenerates’ and to call for the interment of specifically homosexuals but also, by extension, all those who did not lead a ‘normal life’, including Jews and gypsies. Sanders then argues that in *Fugitive Pieces* Anne Michaels inverts and challenges the way the

¹⁶ Marianne Hirsch notes that the practice of commemorating Jewish communities that disappeared can be traced back to the start of the twentieth century when Eastern European Jews emigrated to the West. This tradition entailed the production of memorial books or ‘yizker bikher’ in order to preserve the memory of these cultures. Hirsch further remarks that the Jews who survived the Holocaust continued this tradition and produced memorial books so that future generations could learn what life was like in Jewish communities before the genocide took place (1998: 423-433).

Nazis used the image of the bog body. Instead of denoting condemnation and death, Michaels uses it to represent resistance and survival. Sanders writes, “[Michaels] usurps the archaeological iconography Himmler had exploited and shows how the bodies can be about *not* forgetting the crime against humanity committed during the Holocaust” (2009: 70, my emphasis). Accordingly, this spirit of rebellion and resilience is not only epitomised by Jakob’s re-emergence from the bog and subsequent rescue but also by making mention of the Moorsoldaten-song which the Borgermoor prisoners invented in opposition to Nazi tyranny.¹⁷

Analogous to his own rescue, Jakob, then, sets out to salvage the ghetto diaries (and with that the memories) of those Jews who died in the war, thereby striking back at National Socialism’s *Judenpolitik*. The idea that it is an *obligation* to do so is continued—along with the trope of bog-bodies—in Part II, where Ben has taken over as narrator. When he is twelve and reads about bog people for the first time, Ben feels comforted in the knowledge that they have been preserved. Later he is able to explain why:

I see now that my fascination wasn’t archaeology or even forensics: it was biography. The faces that stared at me across the centuries ... were the faces of people without names. They stared and waited, mute. *It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be.*

(221, my emphasis)

As was Jakob, Ben is clearly dictated by his conscience to imagine and honour the lives of the dead. That they share a sense of moral obligation becomes even more evident when Ben recounts how, after the war had ended, mass graves were opened up and corpses excavated. It is particularly his account of one such a site near Warsaw which reveals the moral imperative both he and Jakob are living under. To emphasise how Soviet prisoners and Jewish survivors doing the excavation work would dig up far more than just decaying cadavers, Ben quotes from one of Jakob’s books and writes, “They put their bare hands not only into death ... but into emotions, beliefs, confessions. One man’s memories then another’s, thousands whose lives it was their duty to imagine” (279). Though he admits that imagining such lives and memories is “elusive and deductive ... Guesswork, a hunch” (222), Ben sees it as his responsibility to try and discover the psyche of the deceased, and believes “Even the most reticent subject can be—at least in part—posthumously constructed” (ibid.). Ben certainly fulfils his self-assigned task for in the diegetic world of the narrative he is ultimately responsible for bringing to light the life stories of a *number* of people. First, it is he who goes to Idhra where, with a stroke of luck, he retrieves Jakob notebooks. Following his find, he has Jakob’s memoirs published and by this intervention succeeds in giving a voice not only to Jakob but also to those who feature in his writing, i.e. those who were killed and silenced in the war. Additionally he sets Jakob’s life story within the framework narrative of his own life. By thus extending Jakob’s memoirs with his own, Ben not only makes known his parents’ story of escape and survival but also conveys the insidious ways in which war and exile are imparted to future generations.

¹⁷ In *Fugitive Pieces* it is through Naomi’s character that we are introduced to the song invented by the ‘Moorsoldaten’ or ‘Peat-Bog Soldiers’. She tells us, “The Nazis didn’t allow prisoners to sing anything except Nazi marching songs while they cut the peat, so it was real rebellion to invent a song of their own” (240). The fact that she associates the song with Jakob undergirds the contention that in making him re-emerge from the bog, Michaels is challenging Nazi domination.

Fugitive Pieces, to borrow Jakob's term, is an instance of 'Russian dolls': the memories and stories of Jews persecuted and killed in the war are embedded in Jakob's memoirs, which in turn are framed by Ben's account of his own life—and Ben's narrative, of course, is contained within the text written by Anne Michaels. In this way, Michaels's writing performs the very task it assigns her protagonists. Put differently, because it reinstates forgotten life narratives, *Fugitive Pieces* becomes—by proxy—the memoirs of those killed in the war, of those whose ghetto diaries were never found, studied, spoke or writ.¹⁸ If we accept that Michaels and her protagonists mirror one another's actions, a reasonable question to ask would be if they also share other similarities. As such, a closer look at the author's personal life seems appropriate, though this will no doubt be a source of vexation to Michaels herself who has obstinately refused to divulge any personal information that might be brought in connection with her work.¹⁹ Though not much, in consequence of her reticence, is known about her private life, what we *do* know that in the 1930s Anne Michaels's father emigrated to Canada, and that his Polish background played an important role in her life. In the introduction to the Bloomsbury edition of *Fugitive Pieces*, John Berger writes, "Some of the family stories she heard as a child came from the eastern side of the Dnieper" (2009). A few obvious parallels can already be drawn between her own life and that of her characters—like Jakob she is a poet, and like Ben she grew up in Canada, the child of a Polish émigré father. As regards the question of whether she is Jewish to boot, Michaels has resolutely refused to give a clear answer, this because she feels it would lead people to believe that writing about the war and the Holocaust was important to her only because such an undertaking was vested with personal interest. Instead, she insists that it should make no difference whether one is Jewish or Catholic or Greek, or whether one was born during the war or after, for "we should all be interested, no matter where we come from, or who our parents are ... These questions concern us all" (Crown, 2009).

One more analogy needs to be made between Michaels and her protagonists. Annick Hillger writes that *Fugitive Pieces* evokes Walter Benjamin's concept of *Jetztzeit*. Accordingly, linear time is reconfigured and the notion of "a history which keeps the past open in memory of the future" (1999: 29) explored. Hillger claims that the novel thus underscores the idea that the past needs to be revisited in order to redeem the present. As such Michaels is said to evince a moral obligation and a "responsibility to the past" (30). The contention that Michaels regards remembering as a moral imperative is corroborated by what the author herself reveals in a section of the reading guide to the Bloomsbury edition entitled "Anne Michaels' Favourite Books". Questioned on her favourite contemporary book, Michaels mentions W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Her reasons, among others, include that Sebald keeps the reader spellbound by his use of language and that he makes "history ... a visceral act" (2009). However, it is her final comment that "For Sebald, memory is a deeply moral act" (ibid.) and that she finds this "particularly moving" (ibid.) which seem

¹⁸ According to Susan Gubar, bringing back the dead is a motif commonly found in the work of post-Holocaust writers. Gubar claims that in *Fugitive Pieces*, both the writer and her protagonists "typify the attempts of many creative writers, visual artists, and scholars to witness the witnesses in a manner that displays how post-Holocaust proxy-witnessing will attempt to keep memory of the Shoah alive during a period (soon to come) when there will be no survivors alive to attest for themselves" (2002: 271).

¹⁹ In an interview with *The Guardian*, Michaels motivates her determination not to divulge any biographical details by arguing "we read differently when we know even the most banal facts of an author's life" (Crown, 2009). While cognisance of such views has duly been taken, the study of a book as significant as *Fugitive Pieces* merits if not requires (in my view, at least) some background information on the author, especially in light of the claim that Michaels's life and writing reflects that of her protagonists'.

especially striking, for here more than anywhere else we get a sense of the responsibility she feels towards remembering the past.

In summary it can be said that recalling past lives takes centre stage in the text. Whether this entails deciphering traces left in the natural world, retrieving buried artefacts or imaginatively reconstructing memories, the point is that the dead constantly need to be kept before our eyes. The idea that this is a moral obligation is expressed by the protagonists in the text and endorsed by the author herself. As we have seen, this correlation in the importance they ascribe memory, in addition to the other characteristics they share, almost invites an analogy between Michael's life and that of her main characters. Ironically, though she tries to steer away from confirming or denouncing the autobiographical in her writing, it seems unavoidable that parallels will be drawn between life in the concrete world and life in the text, and autobiographical inferences made.

Terra incognita

The two main trajectories of this essay are experimentation with life writing on the one hand and exile and the Holocaust on the other. We started off by looking at the latter and by pointing out how exile continues after the war has ended. In this respect it was postulated that while displacement may take many forms (including geographical dislocation, cultural alienation, familial estrangement, self-doubt and trauma), it is almost always accompanied by emotional distress. Further it was maintained that these feelings of inadequacy and unease may be carried across generations, and this to devastating effect. The focus then shifted to memoir and the writing process, and in particular to why it is important to write down the experiences of one's exilic past. Here the text was said to intimate that through writing about the past, feelings of guilt and remorse can be expiated and traumatic events dealt with. In addition to exhibiting such healing properties, memoir writing was argued to have the power to eradicate the silence enforced on war victims by acting in their stead. As it was subsequently claimed that *Fugitive Pieces* becomes the memoirs of Holocaust victims by proxy and thus enacts that which it suggests, parallels were drawn between the life of the author and that of her characters.

Charting the route travelled thus far enables us to see how we have made our way from war, exile and unease to memoir and life writing. As we now continue our journey, the focus will increasingly be on the autobiographical genre. As such it will be maintained that the use of memoir not only undergirds the importance of resurrecting the life narratives of the dead but also that it conveys the omnipresent sense of dislocation and malaise found in the text—not only of those who were persecuted, incarcerated and/or exiled, but also of those who survived the war or who followed a generation after, those left with the duty and charge of keeping the dead alive. For the purposes of ascertaining how the narrative effectively transmits feelings of alienation, we will ask to what extent Michaels experiments with the autobiographical genre. In this regard it will be claimed that the text questions the clear division between historical truth and fictionalised accounts of the past by blurring boundaries between genres as well as by conflating the real and the unreal world. Only once this has been argued can we (finally) move on to look at how oscillating between different realms creates uncertainty and conveys the characters' sense of displacement and unease.

It has previously been claimed that writers can use their craft to give a voice to those men and women killed in the war. Indeed, it has been suggested that it is the moral obligation of those who survived to imagine into existence the memories of those who did not. Seeing that these written accounts embody forgotten and discarded lives and as it were act on their behalf, it is inevitable that they will conflate fact and fiction. Put differently, since the whole point of the writing exercise is to imagine into being the lives of “those who had lived invisibly, who were never known” (147), classifying the text as fictional memoir is giving *Fugitive Pieces* short shrift.

In addition to blurring the borders between fact and fiction by having Jakob’s memoir stand in for diaries lost during the war, Michaels achieves generic uncertainty by manipulating authenticity markers and playing with reader expectation. To elucidate: to the uninformed or unsuspecting reader it might not be clear from the start that this is the diary of a make-believe person (despite the fact that it is formally classified as a novel). To be sure, the story opens in the conventional vein of the bildungsroman²⁰ by intimating that what is to follow is not fictional but the actual memoirs of real-life poet Jakob Beer—we are informed that “Shortly before his death, Beer had begun to write his memoirs” (1). But whereas the bildungsroman uses the first-person, *Fugitive Pieces* features a *third*-person narrator. Thus we infer immediately that novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* are pseudo-autobiographical since we know the authors to be Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens. In contrast, with *Fugitive Pieces* we might be misled into believing that the writer (Anne Michaels) is introducing the journals of a flesh and blood person who died before he was able to publish his memoirs. The illusion of reality is reinforced when Jakob himself confirms that that what we are reading is in fact his autobiography:

Athos’s family house—where I *now* sit and write *this*, these many years later—is a record of the Roussos generations.

(155, my emphasis)

Investigating narratology’s attempts at establishing signposts of fictionality, Martin Lösschnigg argues that in homodiegetic fictional narratives there are no textual features as such which identify them as either memoir or fiction. Instead, “all seems to depend on contextual and/or paratextual aspects” (2006: 2). He adds, however, that these may be “missing ... ambiguous ... or even deliberately misleading” (ibid.). *Fugitive Pieces* is a case in point for it is only in the second part of the book that the reader surmises that it was Ben (and not Michaels) who wrote the introduction to Jakob’s diaries, a finding which *ostensibly* classifies the text as fiction for—as Philippe Lejeune has argued—the narrator, protagonist and author must share an identity in order for a work to be categorised as autobiography proper.²¹ However, since the text itself assigns the writer the task of conjuring up the lives of the deceased and of performing in lieu of diaries lost and memories interred, this statement needs to be revised—*Fugitive Pieces* may not be autobiographical in the traditional or Lejeunean sense of the word but it is not purely fictional either for it resurrects the lives of war victims and makes us (vicariously) relive the horrors of the Holocaust. Phrased differently, Jakob and

²⁰ On the structure of the bildungsroman, Smith and Watson note “The narrators of these texts employ the intimate first person as protagonists confiding their personal histories and attempting to understand how their past experiences formed them as social subjects” (10).

²¹ See Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975).

Ben might not be real-life people but their experiences and emotions certainly coincide with those of real people.

This conflation of fictitious characters and a real historical setting invokes, of course, the historical novel. In their comprehensive overview of the way history is represented in popular media and genres, Korte and Palatschek (2009: 21-25) define the historical novel as bearing on an event which took place in a specific epoch. While the mode pays attention to historical accuracy as a means of informing the reader, it also enlivens events to make the reading experience pleasurable. For this reason the historical novel typically features imaginative figures who act against the backdrop of authentic past events. Since the task of the author, then, is to reconstruct the past as well as make it palatable to the reader, the historical novel will characteristically be a synthesis of fact and fiction. According to this definition, *Fugitive Pieces* clearly qualifies as an historical novel: it has its setting in the second world war and features fictional characters, thereby achieving a mix of the fictive and the real.

There is, however, a twist to the enmeshment of fact and fiction in historical novels, another Jamesian turn of the screw for, as Chiara Bottici points out in *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, the truth or accuracy of any historical account is dubious by default. Bottici notes that structuralist and poststructuralist theory has questioned equating historical narrative with truth and fictional narrative with invention, and writes that theorists “such as Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva, tend to dissolve the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictitious’ narratives, by arguing that there is no ontological difference between the two [for] narrative is not a form that can be added to the content without altering it: narrative ... is a form already full of content” (2007: 203). She concludes that mythical and historical narratives “cannot be counterpoised as fictitious and real stories; rather, they tend to converge” (ibid.). This means that an accurate account of history is simply not possible since the telling thereof is laden with meaning and thus already a kind of content—whether it be the writer’s intention or not. It also means that a novelistic text (say, *Fugitive Pieces*) and the historical account of an epoch (such as World War II) *both* feature fictional elements so that the conventional difference between them all but disappears.

Michaels’s text, by virtue of its ontology as historical novel, implicitly alludes to the impossible task of accurately depicting historical events. By using one of its characters as a mouthpiece it also *overtly* refers to the unreliability of historical narratives and to the fact that the past might be deliberately fabricated. A scholar of history (and specifically of palaeobotany and archaeology), Athos studies the ways in which the SS-Ahnenerbe manipulated history to suit the fascist ideals of the National Socialist Party, and writes about it in a book called *Bearing False Witness*. One example he offers is the way Himmler would bribe scientists to come up with ‘proof’ that the “‘Hottentots’ had been conquered by ancient Aryans [and] that Greek civilization started in ... neolithic Germany” (104). This cannot but make one wonder how Himmler could go on believing in the superiority of his race since he had actually *paid money* to have the past altered. In order to grasp how this is possible, the narrator posits that human nature has the ability to reject obvious contradictions, the moment we do this marking “the lie we will live by. What is dearest to us is often dearer

to us than truth” (166). This psychoanalytic interpretation of human behaviour explains how the Nazis could alter history to support their beliefs without ever acknowledging the irony of their actions.²²

The destruction of the Iron Age town of Biskupin bears witness to the Reich’s self-deceiving quest to come up trumps in history. Because there was evidence of an advanced culture that was *not* German, the Nazis made sure it was erased to the ground:

It wasn’t enough to win the future. The job of Himmler’s SS-Ahnenerbe—the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance—was to conquer history. The policy of territorial expansion—*lebensraum*—devoured time as well as space.

(104)

In addition to alluding to the deliberate fabrication of history, the passage above suggests that the past comprises time as well as space, a motif which runs through the text and which is used to further comment on the unreliable nature of the history narrative. To elucidate the alliance of the temporal and the spatial, the Catalan Atlas of the fourteenth century is used as a trope. We are informed that while the map included the most up-to-date information, it also left unknown parts of the world completely blank and “labelled [them] simply and frighteningly *Terra Incognita*” (136-137). This spatial map is subsequently compared to the map of the world’s history, and it is argued that both comprise that which is known *as well as* that which is unknown. Further it is posited that the closest we might come to pinpointing unknown territory on the territorial chart is “when it melts through the map like a watermark, a stain” (137), and that on the map of history “perhaps the water stain is memory” (*ibid.*). What this analogy wants to suggest is that the past can never be known exactly since there is much that did happen but that does *not* feature explicitly on the historical map. This means that memory is perhaps the only indication we will ever have of that which was not formally set down on paper, and the closest we will come to discovering uncharted territory. Seen this way, though “History and memory share events; that is ... time and space” (138), the fundamental difference is that “History is amoral [but] memory is moral” (*ibid.*). This not only reinforces the notion that any factual account of history is questionable but brings us back to the idea that it is the writer’s duty to exhume the memories of those permanently silenced and to fill in the blank spaces on the map of history.

In summary it can be said that history writing is anything but reliable; not only is the narration of the past inevitably fraught with content and meaning but events might also be manipulated to gratify political ideals and personal preferences. Thus, like any narrative claiming to portray ‘authentic’ past events, the historical novel will ineluctably entail the enmeshment of fact and fiction, not only because make-believe characters and a real historical setting interact but because the rendering of that history itself is problematic. *Fugitive Pieces* might be categorised as fiction, but considering how it plays with its generic status as well as the ways in which it combines the real and the imaginary, such classification seems to retract from the complexity of the text. Indeed, any attempt to assign it a single generic slot would disregard the fact that the

²² The human capacity to harbour opposites within a single entity is expounded by Freud in his paper “The Unconscious” (1915). Freud writes, “The nucleus of the *Ucs.* consists of ... wishful impulses. These instinctual impulses are co-ordinate with one another, exist side by side without being influenced by one another, and are exempt from mutual contradiction. When two wishful impulses whose aims must appear to us incompatible become simultaneously active, the two impulses do not diminish each other or cancel each other out, but combine to form an intermediate aim, a compromise” (186).

autobiographical genre is shifty by its very nature, and thus overlook two very important points. First, as a fictional memoir the text undermines its own fictitiousness for *Fugitive Pieces*—as has been pointed out repeatedly—thematizes (f)actual diaries lost during the war and acts or performs in their stead. A requiem to memories lost, destroyed, invisible and unwritten, it imagines the lives of those who died in the Holocaust by presenting us with the life narratives of its protagonists, thereby of necessity conjoining fiction with nonfiction. Second, in its capacity as an historical novel, it questions the accurate rendition of the past and focuses us in on those stories that were never recorded. As such it casts into doubt the validity of 'factual' or 'true' accounts of history, and effectively blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality.

A malaise shared

In Anne Michaels's story of Holocaust survival, war and exile are depicted as inextricably linked and catastrophic in their effects: geographic dislocation, familial alienation, social exclusion and trauma compromise not only the lives of those who experience it first-hand but also those who have inherited it as part of their legacy. In the face of such crippling war the subject is not, however, left completely powerless; indeed, *Fugitive Pieces* suggests that the debilitating aftermath of battle can be redressed. While in this regard it is notably language which is celebrated as having the power to restore, writing is singled out as a means of coming to terms with one's loss and/or of reinstating the voices of those silenced in the war. As far as resurrecting lives is concerned, the text implies that it is the duty of the writer—fictional or real—to exhume so-called 'ghetto diaries' and to imagine into existence those buried and forgotten, thereby so to speak calling forth the dead from their graves.

Since such imagined and reconstructed life narratives act on behalf of real, discarded ones, they will of necessity conflate fact and fiction. Thus *Fugitive Pieces*, the prototype of this type of memoir, features an interplay of the real and the invented. The fact/fantasy interface in the text is further complicated by virtue of the fact that it is a historical novel, i.e. that it combines an actual event with fictional characters. Considering the theory on the unreliability of historical accuracy as well as what the narrative itself reveals about fabricating the past, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction become increasingly blurred the deeper one delves into an analysis of the text.

Fugitive Pieces, then, cannot categorically be emplaced as either factual or fictional. For the reader this means being left somewhere between the real and the imaginary world and being subjected to feelings of unease and disquiet. Roland Barthes has pointed out the human need to categorise and emplace, and the unease that results if this is not possible. A recurring theme in his work, this issue is also addressed in *S/Z*. Using the symbolic code to interpret the role of the castrato in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes postulates that (s)he is "outside nature, outside any classification, [outside] any meaning" (1973: 201) and hence perceived as monstrous and disgusting. That is to say, because those La Zambinella comes into contact with feel confused and perturbed by the fact that (s)he cannot be emplaced, they see him/her as unnatural and grotesque:

The loss of desire puts the castrato beyond life or death, outside all classification: how to kill what is not classified. How to reach what transgresses, not the internal order of the sexual paradigm ... but the very

existence of difference which generates life and meaning; *the ultimate horror is not death but that the classification of death and life should be broken off.*

(197, my emphasis)

Not being classifiable, says Barthes, is the ultimate horror. Translated into our terms, it is the inability to categorically emplace a text which is the biggest abomination. This explains why not being able to assign Michaels's narrative a fixed place in the generic framework makes us feel lost, anxious or unsettled. Presenting the reader with a prevaricating story that blurs borders, Anne Michaels manages to transmit rather than simply record trauma and loss. In this way the reader is made to share in the dislocation and unease experienced by the characters in the text. In a word, generic uncertainty undergirds the idea of displacement and malaise, and ultimately makes us experience the alienating effects of war and exile for ourselves.

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